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ABSTRACT

Three major purposes comprise the focus of this study. First, it determined the perceptions of Alabama public school principals regarding the degree of importance and extent of implementation of 21 specific educational reform recommendations from 7 major national reform proposals issued in 1983. Second, it discovered the perceptions of these same principals regarding the overall effect of recent reform efforts on students and teachers. Third, it specified perceptual differences or similarities based on level and type of school. The researcher developed a questionnaire distributed to 250 randomly assigned principals, of whom 210 (84 percent) responded. The instrument incorporated three Likert-type scales; used frequencies to measure the percentage of responses to determine the perceptions of principals regarding the importance, implementation, and overall effect of reform; and applied Fisher's Exact Test of Independence to categorize significant differences in the perceptions of groups of principals. Generally, the principals believed that the reforms were important for improving education; however, a sizeable minority felt that they did not have a therapeutic effect on students or teachers nor have they been widely implemented in the state. (JAM)

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CURRENT EFFORTS TO REFORM PUBLIC EDUCATION: HOW DO PRINCIPALS RESPOND?

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CURRENT EFFORTS TO REFORM PUBLIC EDUCATION: HOW DO PRINCIPALS RESPOND?

Howard A. Norris
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This paper reports the findings of a dissertation research study conducted during the Fall of 1987 at the University of Alabama. The study was titled Perceptions of Alabama Public School Principals Regarding Specific Recommendations of the Major National Educational Reform Proposals of 1983.

Five and one-half years have passed since the publication of the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE) titled A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform (1983). In the report the NCEE proclaimed that "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people." A Nation at Risk focused national attention on the issue of school quality in much the same way that the launching of Sputnik had done in 1957. Concerning the impact of A Nation at Risk, McDonnell and Fuhrman (1986) wrote:

> Even the keenest observer surveying public education in 1982 could not have predicted that, within a year, the condition of the nation's public schools, would be a page one story in every newspaper in the country, and educational reform would move to the top of the policy agenda in a majority of states. (p. 44)

Following the release of A Nation at Risk in 1983, numerous other national and regional reports and educational studies were published. For example, Action for Excellence: A Comprehensive Plan to Improve our Nation's Schools (1983), sponsored by the Education Commission of the States, focused on the link between public education and a healthy national economy. Making the Grade (1983), sponsored by the Twentieth Century Fund, advocated a strong federal involvement in public education. Educating Americans for the 21st Century (1983), sponsored by the National Science Foundation, focused on math, science, and technology instruction in public schools. Meeting the Need for Quality: Action in the South (1983), sponsored by the Southern Regional Education Board, focused indirectly on K-12 public education by recommending changes in the education of teachers. High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America (1983) sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, focused on the public high school, and A Place Called School: Prospects for the Future (1983), sponsored by several foundations, contained numerous recommendations for the improvement of public education (Education Commission of the States, 1983).

Although some of the reform proposals were directed at different aspects of public education, there were several themes which were common to each of the proposals. These common themes included the development of homework

guidelines, attendance policies, promotion-retention policies, career-ladders, core-curriculums, more vigorous curriculum standards and graduation requirements, time-on-task requirements, and at-risk programs for potential dropouts. The reform proposals also recommended improving teacher education programs and teacher evaluation systems, increasing teacher certification standards, lengthening the school day/year, partnerships with businesses, and utilization of non-education professionals in schools.

During the past five and one-half years policymakers in most states have responded to the call for reform by enacting a number of the recommendations made by the reform proposals.

The significance of the principal's role in the successful implementation of school improvement strategies has been well documented in the literature on educational change (Jwaideh, 1984). The attitudes and subsequent actions of the building principal regarding a particular reform recommendation appears to influence significantly whether that reform is successfully implemented into a school program. Research is scant regarding the school principal's perceptions of the major reform recommendations of the current educational reform movement. To this point an investigation of the perceptions of Alabama public school principals regarding specific reform recommendations was

conducted during the Fall of 1987 at The University of Alabama.

In this paper we will first share with you two surveys in which school principals were requested to record their perceptions concerning current reform initiatives. Second, we will discuss the results of the study we conducted regarding the perceptions of Alabama public school principals toward recent reform efforts.

Related Research

In 1984, Albrecht sampled high school principals from across the country to assess the impact that 24 of the most publicized reform recommendations would have if each were implemented in his or her school. The findings were as follows:

Recommendations perceived as desirable by at least 70 percent of the respondents were as follows:

1. Using instructional time more efficiently (90%);
2. Emphasizing higher level reasoning and thinking skills (88.9%);
3. Raising academic expectations teachers have for students (88.4%);
4. Increasing teachers' salaries (83.6%);
5. Providing extended contracts to teachers for curriculum development (85.7%);
6. Creating career ladders (74.4%).

Recommendations perceived as undesirable were as follows:

1. Lengthening the school year to 200-220 days (17.2%);
2. Increasing reliance on standardized tests for promotion purposes (20.9%);
3. Lengthening school day to seven hours (34.9%) (45.3% opposed);
4. Eliminating supervising duties for teachers (30%) (39.6% opposed);
5. Restricting the number of students assigned to each guidance counselor to 100 (33.1%) (38.3% opposed).

Albrecht concluded:

> Clearly, principals believe that what teachers do in the classroom and how they are rewarded and recognized hold the key to program improvement in their schools. The agreement in these two emphases cuts across all practical purposes, across all geographic regions. Interestingly, some of the reform programs that have received significant attention from the media - merit pay for teachers, assigning far more homework, raising admission standards to higher education institutions, and toughening graduation requirements--received only lukewarm support from principals, (p. 99).

According to a survey conducted during 1986 for the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company by Louis Harris and Associates, Inc., 79% of the principals responding indicated that recently implemented reforms were having a positive effect on students; 70% of the principals indicated that reforms were having a positive effect on teachers (Harris, 1986, p. 23).

Other findings included:

1. Only 40 percent of the principals responding favored merit pay systems while 55 percent opposed them (p. 25); however,
2. Fifty-nine percent of the principals responding favored career ladder programs while only 33 percent opposed them (p. 26);
3. Forty-two percent of the principals responding indicated that curriculum-related reforms were more significant while 17 percent indicated that teacher-related reforms were the most significant (p. 30);
4. Principals responding to the survey indicated that reforms raising graduation requirements and increasing funding were the most significant reforms. Other highly rated reforms included student competency testing, reforms concerning special education, and changes in the school day and/or year (p. 30).

The primary purpose of this investigation was to determine the perceptions of Alabama public elementary and secondary school principals regarding the degree of importance and extent of implementation of selected educational reform recommendations proposed in the current educational reform movement. A secondary purpose was to determine the perceptions of principals regarding the

overall effect that current reform efforts have had on students and teachers in Alabama public schools. A further purpose was to determine if significant differences existed in the perceptions of groups of Alabama principals based on level of school (elementary, grades K-8, secondary, grades 9-12), and type of school (city, county).

Method

Subjects

A random sample of 250 public elementary and secondary school principals designated in the 1987-88 Alabama Education Directory comprised the sample population. Seventy-eight percent (n=196) of the sample were elementary school principals and twenty-two percent (n=54) were secondary school principals. Thirty-nine percent (n=98) of the sample were principals in city school systems and 61% (n=152) were principals in county school systems. The percentage of elementary, secondary, city, and county principals responding to the survey was proportional to that found in the total population.

Questionnaires were received from 210 of the 250 principals for an overall return rate of 84%. The return rate for elementary principals was 85% and the return rate for secondary principals was 80%. Of the 210 principals responding to the survey, 79% were elementary school principals and 21% were secondary school principals.

The return rate for principals in city school systems was 85% and the return rate for principals in county school systems was 84%. Of the 210 principals responding to the survey, 39% were from city school systems and 61% were from county school systems.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire contained 21 reform recommendations which represented common themes contained in five major educational reform reports and two national studies issued during 1983 (Table 1). The five educational reform reports and two national studies were selected because each met the following criteria:

1. The focus and implementation of the recommendations contained in the reports and studies were directed primarily at the public elementary and secondary levels of schooling;
2. Each of the reports and studies was published during the year 1983 and were assumed to have defined the character of the current educational reform movement;
3. The reports and studies received the most attention in the literature.

Based upon the criteria enumerated above, the following major educational reform reports and studies were selected for inclusion in this investigation. A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform, by the National Commission on Excellence in Education; Action for

Table 1

Number of Reports Containing Recommendations

	Recommendation	No. of Reports
1.	Career ladder	5
2.	Higher standards for prospective teachers	5
3.	Incentives to attract prospective teachers	5
4.	Liberal arts background for teachers	5
5.	More regerous curriculum standards	5
6.	Performance-based pay	4
7.	Core curriculum	4
8.	Time-on-task requirements	4
9.	Extend length of school day/year	3
10.	Promotion/retention policies	3
11.	More rigourous high school graduation requirements	3
12.	Improve teacher salaries	3
13.	Attendance policies	3
14.	Student codes of conduct	3
15.	At-risk programs for potential dropouts	3
16.	Effective teacher evaluations system	3
17.	Extend teachers' contract period for professional development	3
18.	Utilize non-education professionals in schools	3
19.	Homework guidelines	3
20.	Partnerships with busines	2
21.	Testing for students	2

Excellence; A Comprehensive Plan to Improve Our Nation's Schools, by the Task Force on Education for Economic Growth; Making the Grade, from the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Policy; Educating Americans for the 21st Century, by the National Science Board Commission on Precollege Education in Mathematics, Science and Technology; Meeting the Need for Quality: Action in the South, by the Southern Regional Education Board; High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America, by Ernest Boyer; and A Place Called School: Prospects for the Future, by John I. Goodlad.

Directions on the questionnaire instructed the respondents to indicate their perceptions regarding the importance of each of the 21 reform recommendations for improving public education in the state of Alabama by selecting one of four points on the following scale:

4 = Very Important

3 = Important

2 = Only Slightly Important

1 = Not Important

Respondents also were instructed to indicate their perceptions regarding the extent to which, they believed, each of the 21 reform recommendations has been implemented in Alabama public school systems and teacher preparation programs by selecting one of four points on the following scale:

4 = Implemented In Most School Systems/Teacher Preparation Programs

3 = Implemented In Some School Systems/Teacher Preparation Programs

2 = Implemented In Only A Few School Systems/Teacher Preparation Programs

1 = Not Implemented

The questionnaire also contained two questions regarding the overall effect of current reform efforts on Alabama public school students and teachers. Respondents were instructed to indicate their perceptions by selecting one of three points on the following scale:

3 = Positive Effect

2 = Not Much Effect

1 = Negative Effect

Procedures

The questionnaire and a cover letter were forwarded by U.S. Mail to each of the 250 randomly selected participants during the Fall of 1987. In addition, a self-addressed, stamped return envelope was provided to each respondent for returning the questionnaire. Approximately one week following the initial mailing a postcard reminder was sent to all non-respondents. Approximately two weeks after the initial mailing another questionnaire, cover letter, and postcard were sent to non-respondents. Approximately three weeks following the first mailing, a telephone call was made to the remaining non-respondents encouraging them to complete and return the questionnaire as soon as possible.

Information provided by the survey respondents was processed using a computer program from the Statistical Analysis System (SAS) (SAS Institute, Inc., 1985). Responses were analyzed using frequency of response and percentage for each of the questionnaire items. In addition, Fisher's Exact Test of Independence was used as a means of statistical treatment to determine if significant differences existed between groups of respondents based on level of school and type of school. A total of 88 tests were conducted using the responses to the 44 questionnaire items. The level of significance was set at .01.

Results

The primary purpose of this investigation was to determine the perceptions of Alabama public elementary and secondary school principals regarding the degree of importance and extent of implementation of 21 reform recommendations from the major educational reform proposals of 1983. In some cases, expected cell frequencies were not large enough to conduct Chi-Square Analysis. For this reason response categories "important" and "very important" were combined and the percentages were reported in Table 2 as "important". Response categories" implemented in most systems/teacher preparation programs" and "implemented in some school systems/teacher preparation programs" were combined and the percentages were reported in Table 2 as "implemented".

Table 2

Percentage of Responses Regarding the Importance and Implementation of Reform Recommendations for the Total Sample

Item	Importance		Implementation	
	N	%	N	%
1. Time-on-Task requirements for each course/subject	207	92.3%	201	70.6%
2. Promotion/retention policies that eliminate social promotion	207	81.2%	200	66.0%
3. Codes of conduct for students	207	95.2%	199	78.1%
4. Homework guidelines for each course/subject	206	76.6%	202	50.5%
5. Performance-based salary system for teachers	204	62.3%	200	14.5%
6. Effective teacher evaluation system	206	93.7%	201	62.2%
7. More rigorous curriculum standards for students	206	87.4%	201	71.1%
8. Utilization of non-education professionals in schools	207	58.9%	202	35.6%
9. Improved teacher salaries	207	97.6%	202	30.0%
10. Career ladder system for teachers	204	42.6%	199	48.7%
11. Achievement/competency testing for all students	207	87.9%	202	84.7%
12. Core curriculum for all students	205	86.3%	200	68.5%
13. At-risk programs for potential dropouts	206	88.8%	201	88.8%

Table 2--Continued

Item	Importance N	Importance %	Implementation N	Implementation %
14. Extended teacher contract period for professional development	206	78.6%	202	10.4%
15. Establishment of school-business partnerships	206	73.3%	201	43.8%
16. Attendance policies for students	206	95.7%	201	79.6%
17. More rigorous high school graduation requirements	205	82.4%	201	77.1%
18. Lengthened school day/ school year	205	40.0%	200	19.5%
19. Higher standards for prospective teachers	205	91.7%	194	57.7%
20. Incentives to attract prospective teachers	204	91.2%	192	30.2%
21. Emphasis on liberal arts background for prospective teachers	203	68.5%	193	32.1%

The overall analysis (Table 2) indicated that the vast majority of principals (at least 90%) regarded seven of the 21 reform recommendations as either important or very important for improving public education in the state of Alabama. These reforms include improving teacher salaries, devising and implementing attendance policies and codes of conduct for students, developing time-on-task requirements for each course/subject, developing effective teacher evaluation systems, raising standards for prospective teachers, and offering incentives to attract prospective teachers.

As indicated in Table 2, a majority of principals (50-89%) viewed 12 of the 21 reform recommendations as either important or very important for improving public education in the state of Alabama. These reforms include developing and implementing at-risk programs for potential dropouts, achievement/competency testing for all students, more rigorous curriculum standards, establishment of a core-curriculum, more rigorous high school graduation requirements, establishment of promotion/retention policies that eliminate social promotion, an extended teacher contract period for professional development, homework guidelines for each course/subject, establishment of school/business partnerships, placing greater emphasis on a liberal arts background in the training of teachers, a

performance-based salary system for teachers, and utilization of non-education professionals in schools.

Only two of the 21 reform recommendations, establishment of a career-ladder program for teachers and lengthening the school day/year, were regarded by a majority of principals (at least 50%) as either not important or only slightly important for improving public education in the state of Alabama (Table 2).

The overall analysis (Table 2) also indicated that the majority of principals (at least 50%) perceived that 12 of the 21 reform recommendations have been implemented in most or at least some public school systems and teacher preparation programs in the state of Alabama. These reforms include establishment of at-risk programs for potential dropouts, achievement/competency testing for all students, attendance policies for students, codes of conduct for students, more rigorous high school graduation requirements, more rigorous curriculum standards, time-on-task requirements for each course/subject, establishment of a core-curriculum, promotion/retention policies that eliminate social promotion, establishment of an effective teacher evaluation system, higher standards for prospective teachers, and homework guidelines for each course/subject.

As indicated in Table 2, a majority of principals (at least 50%) perceived that nine of the 21 reform recommendations either have not been implemented at all, or

have been implemented in only a few public school systems and teacher preparation programs in the state of Alabama. These reforms include establishment of school/business partnerships, utilization of non-education professionals in schools, placing greater emphasis on a liberal arts background for prospective teachers, providing incentives to attract prospective teachers, improving teacher salaries, establishment of a career-ladder system for teachers, lengthening the school day/year, extending teacher contract periods for professional development, and establishment of a performance-based salary system for teachers.

A secondary purpose of this investigation was to determine the perceptions of principals regarding the overall effect that current reform efforts have had on students and teachers in Alabama public schools. Table 3 presents the percentage of responses for the total sample. Slightly more that half (51.4%) of the principals indicated that educational reform efforts generally have had a positive effect on students while 44.2% indicated not much effect and 4.4% indicated a negative effect. Only 43.4% of the principals indicated that educational reform efforts generally have had a positive effect on teachers while 41.5% indicated not much effect and 14.1% indicated a negative effect.

A further purpose of this investigation was to determine if significant differences existed in the

Table 3

Percentage of Responses for Tatal Sample Regarding the Overall Effect of Reform

Item	N	Negative	Not Much Effect	Positive
Overall effect of reform on students	206	4.4%	44.2%	51.4%
Overall effect of reform on teachers	205	14.1%	41.5%	43.4%

perceptions of groups of Alabama principals based on level of school (elementary, grades K-8; secondary, grades 9-12), and type of school (city,county). There were no significant differences in the groups of principals on any of the 44 questionnaire items (1 df $p < .01$). Probability (p) values ranged from .017 to 1.

Conclusions

The majority of Alabama public school principals surveyed believe that 19 of the 21 reform recommendations investigated in this study are important for improving public education in the state of Alabama. They also believe that 12 of these 19 reform recommendations have been implemented in most, or at least some public school systems and teacher preparation programs. Nevertheless, only slightly more than half (51.4%) of the principals believe that reform efforts have had a positive effect on students and less than half (43.4%) believe that reform efforts have had a positive effect on teachers.

Obviously, Alabama public school principals support much of what is being done in terms of school reform. They are, however, not convinced that what is being done is having a positive effect on either students or teachers. It appears that reform efforts in Alabama perhaps have not gone far enough. While Alabama principals believe that many important reforms have been implemented, it is their perception that certain teacher-based reforms (i.e.,

improved compensation and other incentives to attract talented prospects, greater emphasis on liberal arts background for prospective teachers, performance-based salary system for teachers, extended teacher contract period for professional development), and certain school-based reforms (i.e., utilization of non-education professionals in schools and establishment of school/business partnerships), are important but neglected areas of school reform in Alabama.

Alabama public school principals clearly view establishment of a career-ladder system for teachers and lengthening the school day/year as unimportant for improving public education in Alabama. Their view on career-ladder contradicts earlier nationwide surveys of principals (Albrecht, 1984; Louis Harris & Associated, Inc. 1986). There is little doubt that the experience of Alabama public school principals with the Alabama Performance-Based Career Incentive Program was negative which probably explains why the principals expressed such strong negative feelings about the recommendation.

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